

## chapter 5. caught in a web

Crow awoke and jolted from the pain of waking, then from the pain of jolting, and she squeezed and scrunched her face in protest as she pushed herself up into a sit. Then, she leaned back, head thumping against the softwood wall, and let out a shuddering sigh.

Her entire body burned and ached: her skin was moist and spongy, feathers drenched with sweat, and fur matted and sticky. Each and every muscle felt torn and pulled and twisted and raw and wrong, and as she turned her head to gaze out the windows, the muscles in her neck gave out and her head flopped over, drooping down. Crow winced and whined from the effort of lifting her chin, then her neck, so she could look up at the sky.

It was a pallid lavender night with few to no clouds anywhere in sight. The true moon floated above, fully illuminated by pinkish light. The light bounced off of the moon's surface and scattered out, weaving through the fluffy cerulean rings of fog that swirled serenely and perfectly about it.

The moon was fully lit. The last she had seen it, and Crow made sure to see it every night, it had been fully dim.

A whole moon had passed since she saw the moon? That could not be right. Her head began to spin, though she could not tell if physically it moved or if the world had simply begun to churn and toss about. Her lips trembled, and her eyes began to water, and all at once she lost the part where her body ended and the world about it began. Once again, she was suffocating

under a blanket of grief, which covered her in a far more absolute way than anything physical could hope to.

In a word, she was subsumed. In a moment, she was suspended again in thoughts and feelings so thick they became a nightmare waking. Every piece and part of her dropped away from her senses, and eyes closed, she felt as though she was drifting off again, not to sleep, but some deeper place, far, far away from the world and all its turnings.

And still, she spun, thoughts twirling in circles and draining away while her nausea ebbed and washed over her in crashing waves that sent her buckling soundlessly, ever and always curling tighter beneath the new chains that bound her.

A girl as small as her could hardly hold herself. What else could she do under such weight, but be crushed by it?

...

...

She had not been awake for two weeks.

Sitting on her ass, knees pulled as tight to her as they could be, head tucked down and away from the world, she understood this.

And it was not sleep, nor a coma. She had done those things, and this was not that.

The incapacitation was total, absolute, and unnatural, and even still she felt it tugging on her nerves with little hooks, trying to compel her out of the room towards the seamstress, to search for whatever had made her this way.

Sitting there, she tried to remember. Eyes neatly shut, she tried to walk her brain back into the past, just the recent past, to know what had happened.

She imagined some kind of purplish haze tinged red, that coiled around and hung heavy in the air like fog. Mentally, she pushed through it, and the further she walked back, the thinner it grew, until she was standing on the precipice of Cane's estate once more, staring down at the Abyss, gathering her courage for just one final effort.

She did not even remember waking, nor anything that happened after.

The air was cold, now, and as she opened her eyes, Crow shivered from talon to tailfeather to the tip of her tallest ear, muscles locked and spasming in the frigid cold that settled all around her. With a shaking, trembling yawn, she fixed her eyes weakly on the blood-red door.

Crow had found herself in the den of a predator.

And unlike Raven, this one had no use for her once she was spent.

On trembling knees, Crow stood, hands splayed wide and pressing down hard into the side of the bed. At her full height, still hunched, she wobbled and teetered, barely able to stand upright. But still, she stood.

Some sort of morbid curiosity guided her head down, and Crow peered over the heavy dark bruising that crested her cheek and hugged her eye to find out, finally, what had happened to her flesh. Immediately, she recoiled and flinched back at the sight of it, whimpering as she lifted her chin up high to stare at the ceiling. Her skin, almost all over, was covered in thick, purple-black bruises that snaked up and along her body like a rash.

In *other* places— the very thought of which made her head twitch in disgust and her armfeathers prickle in hesitation— there were long, thick, brown-black scabs, which cracked and oozed out thin and slippery green slime. A different wound, higher up, came up in a low, semi-cylindrical boil that pulled her skin so taut that it became translucent, revealing the yellow, curdling sludge sloshing around within it.

All over, too, she could feel her skin hanging looser around her, pulling ever so slightly heavier against her muscles and bones. Crow grabbed hold of some skin that drooped from her bicep and rolled it between her fingers, back and forth, like a wave, as she contemplated how bad it was.

And through all this, her stomach *burned* like fire. It shot out spikes of hot, radiating pain, carried by the lighter, acidic scouring that undercut it. She started to retch, though she knew not why, and she began to fall forward from the weight of it. Turning towards the bed, she fell onto her hands, balled tightly, grasp filled with as much of the bed's covering as she could

grab. And then, all at once, she felt her insides quiver and spasm, and she began to gag and spit viscous bile out onto the bed, where she then shook, her whole skeleton rattling and trembling with the effort of staying conscious, staying upright, staying *alive*.

"n.. no," she gasped, trying, and failing, to straighten her arms and push herself off of her puddling streams of bile.

"no, no, n.. mmnh," she cried and whimpered and shrieked as one of her arms gave out and the side of her head splashed into the bile, rolling across it like a stamp, and she forced herself to fall back onto her ass with a heavy thud.

Her vision was cloudy, but her head pointed at the bed, she could suddenly see it all. As her flesh eye dripped with bile, therefore squeezed shut, only her **precious piece** allowed her to see the world, and what it showed her was exactly what she had wanted to see:

the wretched past, and her misery.

,

Crow knew not why, but the only thing she could not do was pull herself away from the terrible view to which she had found the one-and-only front-row seat.

Before her was the visual cacophony of the past, unfurling and spilling out all about her, vague shapes where bodies once moved tracing through the air like ghostly specters, floating through the space, in their own time, their shapes twisting and distorting and unrolling in a

seamless and honest way. There was nothing hidden, nothing obscured, just the full truth— all of it— playing out for her, before her, to her before her.

She tried to close her eye but could not find the strength to do it. Instead, her eye focused down on the details, playing for her a single piece of the past at a time. The shapes and figures became clear, and the shape of the seamstress was there, no— *here*, with her before her, before her, pressing her— before?— down into the bed, again, and again, and again, and the past shook and trembled, shimmering like a mirage, sputtering and jumping all about,

then,  
again,  
then again,  
and then,  
again,  
before,  
then after,  
another,  
another,  
broken,  
thrashing,  
pliable,  
soft, and cute,  
and so cuddly!  
the noises you make, Crow,  
aren't they *wonderful*?  
I'd ask if you think so, but,  
ah,  
it seems you've gone brainless for me,  
so soft for me,  
so good for me,  
so perfect for M—

Crow screamed and clawed at her face, scrabbling her claws deep into the flesh around her false eye, covering it to cover up the false past, the wrong past, the past that could not pass for her past,

and her fingers scratched, and her face split apart and bled under her claws, and she screamed again, tears and blood together flying off as she ripped her head around, trying to pull herself over the pain so she could do what had to be done, but her hand fell away,

**betrayed,**

and it writhed and spasmed and dripped with fresh blood,

and her head spun, and some sort of thumping sound came from downstairs and around, somewhere deeper in the house,

and her head spun faster, and she fell forward, face-first, crashing into the moss. Delirious, she shoved her face into it, digging her nose down against it, breathing in as hard as she could, before letting all of her breath spill out in a loud huff.

She felt herself no longer, her senses extending only to the texture of the moss, the scent of it, the way it flaked and wiggled as she clawed at it, as if she could burrow into it and be subsumed by it, to become the moss, to become anything other than the broken shell she was,

and her eyes fell shut under shock so heavy she mistook it for respite,

but then her chest buckled, and shifted, and the thumping grew louder, closer,

She couldn't go back to sleep.

not again.

Too much life had passed, in the past.  
and she had things to do.

Things to be doing.

Here, there was no doing, and also no healing?

But she was needing

healing..

She needed something. She was looking for something.

**It.**

**It** was not here, though.

**It wasn't here.**

"I..," she rasped, voice hoarse, as she twisted her arms around and planted her wrists down into the moss, pushing off them, not even wincing as they twisted further and rolled, "**It** isn't,,"

Crow flopped over, twisting in the air, onto her back, collapsing into a tangled heap, and she clawed up the side of the bed, wrenching herself up, hand over hand, as she dragged herself first onto her knees, then one final time, onto her talons. Her head lolled forward, *thunk*, against the bedframe, and she stayed like that for a moment, mouth agape and rasping and heaving wildly for air, eyes wide and feral, barely an antslength from the wood of the bed's side.

Woozy and wincing, she rose, grinning in satisfaction at the effort, as half of her drooped over and the other half tore from the effort of holding it up.

Finally standing, Crow took a terrible step forward, falling sharply onto her talons, and slapping her hand down quickly onto the side of the bed to catch herself from collapsing yet again.

Okay.

*Slow! Slow!*

*Slower!*

*Slower!*

*Sloooow*. She thought, breathing out heavily, a broad smile still lightening her features. She grasped the side of the bed with both white-knuckled tight, tight, tightly gripped, hardly grasped, the hands, her hands, grasping down hard, or hardly, um.

Her feathers stood up straight with the effort, revealing her spotted red-and-white knuckles that flared and flexed under the heavy load.

Then, she sidled along the bed's frame, transferring her weight onto the nightstand, which rocked back and hit the wall before going still.

Crow yanked the drawer open,  
sending its contents

all about inside of it.  
sssshufflinggggg

With her greedy hand, she reached around inside, pawing around for all of her things,  
up and out  
which she hauled and FLUNG

against her chest,  
which sent her reeling  
back,  
stumbling backwards,  
spinning,  
ass flat against the bed,  
turning,

facing to the window,  
stumbling forward,  
shambling forward,

just one step,  
one more step,  
another step,

I lied,

then another, and another then, too,

*If I stay here, it'll get worse, won't it?*

Her breath trembled and heaved as she shuffled more,  
along the

bed,

away from the door,  
towards the window,  
towards so  
much  
**more.**

*I have to go. I have to leave.*

*Even if the fall kills me, I'm going,*

I'm gone,  
I'm leaving.  
This is too much, too wrong,  
too fast, too quick,  
all over.

I'm sick?

or bro

ken,

no—

And then, the door flew open, sending a frothy spray of moss up splattering against the wall  
as the

bottom of the door cleaved the

top of the moss

clean off.

"Oh my, oh my dear, what's wrong?"

*What's gotten into you?*

The seamstress cooed and tutted, hands raised consolingly ahead of her,  
as she prowled forwards towards

Crow.

Crow stumbled forwards and free, tottering like an unsteady child, as she

the bedframe let go of

ter  
to tee

for  
ward

until she

CRASHED against the  
wall  
with her hands,

then her chest,  
the side of  
her head  
pressed  
flat against  
it,

eyes wild and raving,

tracing the truth of everything that she saw around her as her  
eyes  
lost  
*focus!*  
and her brain  
lost what was left of her  
*clarity.*

She planted her talons down into the moss, knees wobbling and buckling and bending down from her weight as she sagged and leaned, then careened, into the window's frame.

"No," Crow sSSS pat,  
her breath fa  
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g out, hot and

**heavy,**

as the thin

window

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"No,

no.." She

gasped,

moving

her hands

pane,  
the  
along  
up

her right hand planted out  
flat  
against  
it

"Come back right now, Crow,

*that's reckless!*

You could f

a

l

l

*splat*

out

of the window!"

"That's the plan!"

she *giggled*,

*bloody fangs* poking out

*bleeding*

*gums*

from

as she sucked in tremendous,

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breaths

and

T

/ O R E

the window open by

its han  
dle.

Its light,  
silvery  
frame and  
paper-thin glass

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e  
l  
f

aside and out

into the

world,

crashed  
against the  
outside  
wall,

sh

at

ter

ed

from the force, and then

bounced

back

on

its hinges

and creaked

slowly  
back onto the sill,  
towards up  
sticking its feet  
**Crow,** up,  
which was already clambering

pulling itself  
forward  
with something  
while the some other part

clutched  
some things,  
belongings?, to its  
chest.

"You're *insane, little Crow!*  
acting,

get  
down  
this  
instant!

**Do you have any idea how badly** your wounds have gone— you- **you need**  
to stay here with **me** for, say, another three moons at least!

*To recover."*

"I kn

ow," **it** h

i

s

s'd,

"wh

at

s

s be

en goin

g on here!" Its voice trembled from the force of

shouting

and

crac/ked, brea|

|king on every hoarse word that was s pat

down

into

the street below.

around like ants,  
 Lookers-on scattered  
 heads craned,  
 faces t  
 w  
 i d  
 s e  
 t  
 about in confusion derived  
 from its  
 own,  
 "There is no recovery here," tering to  
 it t r em bl ed, tee side side  
 from the pain  
 of speaking.  
 Some thick, viscous thing was caught  
 in  
 its  
 throat  
 and that lump could not be cleared.

It would never be cleared, would it?

There was no cleansing this.

"You're too much Crow!  
making a scene, attracting entirely attention to us,

*Did you forget?*

the part where you're being **hunted**?!

Do you have any idea how bad this could be for **me?**  
my shop?

*Are you trying to run away?*

not only without saying thank you,  
but also while hurting ^  
in the process?

*After everything I've done for you?*

Even over the years?!" The seamstress screamed, veins popping out as it lunged towards

the beast  
in the window.

With only a moment's hesitation,

the beast simply  
lowered its eyes  
and  
*let*  
*go*

of the window.

Immediately, it tilted

forward  
and d  
r  
o  
p  
p  
e  
d

like a rock,

something wet streaming  
up its features and

into its crusty, matted hair.

And then,

just before the end,

its fall stopped.